

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

15 December 2006

Europe

Greek workers stage general strike

On December 13, workers in Greece staged a general strike to protest the governments' draft budget for 2007. The budget would impose a series of austerity measures, including spending cuts in order to keep the spending deficit below 3 percent of GDP.

The strike was called by the General Confederation for Greek Workers and the Federation of Public Administration Employees, and a demonstration was held in the Pedion tou Areos park in central Athens at midday. The workers are also calling for pay increases, a halt to price hikes, contract protection, a better insurance system and an end to high unemployment.

During the strike, public transportation ground to a halt. The metro, tram and Athens-Piraeus electric railway closed for the day, and flights were also cancelled and delayed. Members of the Federation of Civil Aviation Unions (OSPA) held a three-hour work stoppage from noon resulting in the cancellation of about 13 Olympic Airlines flights and delays to 5 more.

Public schools were shut, while employees at hospitals operated with minimum staffing levels. Other important sections of the workforce also supported the strike. These included members of the Greek Federation of Railmen, the Union of Bank Workers, and the Union of Greek Telecom OTE. Part of the government's plan is to reduce its 38 percent holding in OTE, a telecoms company, in preparation for its privatisation.

The 2007 draft budget is subject to parliamentary approval and is expected to be passed shortly.

UK Eurostar cleaners strike in pay dispute

Eurostar train cleaners are set to strike on December 18 in a dispute over pay. The workers are employed by the contractor OCS and are members of the Rail Maritime and Transport (RMT) trade union.

The 100 staff are based at Waterloo international station in south London and the Eurostar depot in west

London. They are demanding a minimum pay rate of £7.05 an hour. Eurostar said that the dispute would not affect services and that pay and conditions are a matter for the contractor.

Bus drivers in Leeds, England, strike in pay dispute

On December 11, nearly 1,000 bus drivers began industrial action in Leeds, west Yorkshire, England. The workers are striking against the First bus company and are members of the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU).

The dispute centres on the issue of pensions. The company plans to end its final salary pension scheme and wants future pension contributions to be capped in line with inflation.

The company employed managers to cross picket lines and drive buses during the day. First said it was able to run 64 buses on their regular bus routes and 22 school services. The drivers are due to take further industrial action on December 23 and 24.

Frozen food company warehouse staff strike in London

Workers employed by the frozen food firm Iceland at its north London depot staged the first in a series of strikes on December 8 in a dispute over pay. Around 250 drivers and warehouse staff are involved in the strike, which followed their rejection of a 2.4 percent pay offer from their direct employer, DHL Exel Supply Chain. The workers are members of the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU).

During the first day of industrial action, the TGWU said gangs of security guards had been mobilised by DHL Exel in an attempt to intimidate and break the strike.

Peter Kavanagh, TGWU senior regional industrial organiser, said, "They are threatening, provoking and intimidating our people. We are trying to deal with the police over a serious incident of assault. It has been a nasty start to what is a lawful strike and a peaceful

protest. There's no Christmas cheer here.”

The strike is expected to have a major impact on the firm as the depot delivers supplies to a total of 180 Iceland stores in London and across the South East and East Anglia. The run-up to the holiday season is usually one of the busiest periods of the year for the frozen food industry.

Workers plan to hold further strike action on December 15, 21 and 22.

Pizza delivery staff at Domino's Pizza in Ireland strike in unofficial action

Staff at the Tallaght branch of Domino's Pizza in the Irish Republic began unofficial strike action on December 8 in a pay dispute. Some 50 employees on the evening shift walked off the job and then picketed at the nearby Walkinstown branch.

The Tallaght staff won the support of around seven drivers to support their protest despite management threats that they would sack any drivers who joined the strike. The picket ended at 9 p.m. due to bad weather locally. Uzair Ahmad, the spokesman for the workers, said that they earned on average around €7 per hour—65c less than the national minimum wage.

Africa

South African gold miners strike over worsening pay and conditions

Around 600 South African gold miners belonging to the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) have walked out on strike at the Centurion gold mine, southeast of Johannesburg. The strike began on December 6, after the new management reneged on a promise to leave existing agreements in place after taking over the mine.

The workforce are demanding the doubling of their current pay of only R1000 (US\$143) a month. NUM spokesperson Mike Fafuli said the workers' complaints also include the removal of death benefits and allowances and the decrease of the annual holiday entitlement. The strikers are demanding that the previous death benefit of R7400 (US\$1056) be reinstated.

The NUM has accused the management of asking the police to evict the strikers from the company-owned hostel.

Kenyan sugar cane cutters strike over pay

Sugar cane cutters supplying the Mumias Sugar Factory in Kenya have been on strike since the end of

November to demand an increase in their wages. The strikers are picketing the factory, and it has been forced to close.

The strike has led to a sharp increase in sugar prices: from Sh60 (US\$0.87) per kilogram before the start of the strike to the current price of between Sh80 and Sh100 (US\$1.16 to US\$1.44).

The strikers are protesting the low wages paid by contractors. The Mumias Sugarcane Farmers Association chairman, Francis Rapando, blamed the contractors for the desperate situation faced by the cutters. “When a similar situation cropped up at Nzoia Sugar Company, it was discovered that contractors used to pay cane cutters a paltry Sh92 (US\$1.33) out of the Sh220 (US\$3.18) the company expected them to pay their workers,” he said.

In the first week of December, riot police were brought in to control the picket line.

Examination markers on strike in Uganda

Around 500 teachers who mark papers for Ordinary Level examinations are on strike in Uganda in a dispute over payment.

The striking examiners are at one of the marking centres in Kabojja Secondary School. Their grievance is the low payment for cross-checking papers that have already been marked. While they are paid sh298 (US\$0.16) per paper for the original marking, they are paid only sh13 (just over half a US cent) per paper for cross-checking. They are demanding that this latter fee be doubled.



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